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ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS RUSH TO GET DRIVER'S LICENSES IN CALIFORNIA

By Miriam Jordan
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Hundreds camped outside overnight to be among the first inside. When the doors opened, the crowd rushed into the building. This wasn't a Black Friday sale. It was the first day California allowed immigrants in the state illegally to apply for a driver's license.

On Jan. 2, the state's Department of Motor Vehicles began tackling a surge of such applicants, complying with a new law allowing those who prove they reside here to qualify for a driver's license regardless of immigration status. In the first three days, 46,200 people applied.

Thousands braved long lines as walk-ins. Others, like Wilian Monroy, a Guatemalan car mechanic in the U.S. for 14 years, had scheduled an appointment. At a Los Angeles DMV office Tuesday, he clutched a folder containing his passport, utility bills and bank statements to prove his identity and California residency. He had arrived at 11 a.m. for his 1 p.m. appointment. "It's a big day for me," said the 35-year-old.

Overseeing the line was DMV manager Kathy Myles-Daniels, who said her branch was "the busiest I've ever seen it."

Statewide, 1.4 million illegal immigrants are expected to apply for licenses over the next three years. To prepare, the DMV has hired 900 additional staff, dispatched representatives to do outreach in immigrant communities and erected four new mega-sized branches.

In doing so, California joins nine other states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia in issuing licenses to undocumented immigrants. Supporters say it promotes road safety; critics say it legitimizes illegal immigrants.

"Granting driver's licenses to illegal aliens is a further attempt...to normalize the status of illegal aliens," said Ira Mehlman, media director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a national group that lobbies against legalizing undocumented immigrants.

For decades, many states with large immigrant populations issued driver's licenses to foreigners regardless of their immigration status. In California, undocumented residents could get licenses until 1994, when debate over illegal immigration began to flare. Other states began to crack down amid heightened security concerns after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

About 40% of the nation's foreign-born individuals now live in a state that offers licenses to residents regardless of status.

Currently, some states with large illegal-immigrant populations, like Texas and Arizona, don't issue licenses to undocumented residents, while Illinois, Maryland and

Washington are among those that do. Offering licenses has become a less polarizing issue in some states as law enforcement, the auto-insurance industry and policy makers in those states have expressed support.

"The worst day is when you get in an accident and look up to see the other person drove off because they are undocumented and unlicensed," said Dan Dunmoyer, head of government and industry affairs at Farmers Insurance. "If people are driving to their jobs, because they have to, it's good for them and other motorists that they be tested, licensed and insured."

Across the country, driving without a license increases the chances an illegal immigrant will be cited, and if arrested, come to the attention of immigration authorities, which could trigger deportation proceedings.

California has the largest undocumented population in the nation, at 2.45 million. Until now, those driving without a license at the least faced steep fines and vehicle seizure. Mr. Monroy said he paid \$1,346 two years ago to get his impounded car back. Blanca Gonzalez, behind him in line, said she was fined \$500 when she was pulled over recently and couldn't produce a license.

Latin American, Asian and African immigrants were among the hundreds who flocked to the Culver City branch to take the DMV's written exam, which is offered in multiple languages, on touch-screen monitors.

Ms. Gonzalez, a Mexican mother of three, said she was nervous because she had had little time to study. Mr. Monroy said he had paid \$55 for a three-hour prep course offered by the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.

The DMV said that statewide 64% of those who took the test in Spanish failed on Jan. 2, the only day for which it released data. Overall in California, about half of all first-time test takers fail the written exam, the agency said. Spokeswoman Jessica Gonzalez said the DMV has encouraged immigrants to study, after noting that a large share of applicants in Nevada failed in the first few weeks after licenses were offered there last year.

Between 9% and 15% of cars on the road in California lack insurance, according to independent estimates, boosting premiums for those insured. Supporters of the licensing law are optimistic the uninsured pool will shrink.

Unlicensed drivers for years have been able to buy insurance from niche players that charge them higher premiums. Under another new California law, low-income undocumented immigrants will be eligible for state-administered low-cost auto insurance. The annual premium for the liability-only insurance is \$339 in San Francisco and \$472 in Los Angeles.

"We're ramping up capacity," said Chris Shultz, deputy commissioner of the California Department of Insurance. The agency has launched a marketing campaign in immigrant communities.

New applicant Mr. Monroy rejoiced at hearing he had passed the written test then immediately joined another queue to schedule a driving test. "Thank God, I passed," said the mechanic, some seven hours after he had arrived at the office.